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CHAPTER TEN

THE RHYTHM OF LEPCHA LIFE

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Those travellers who mention the Lepchas in their accounts of their journeys in Sikkim and Tibet refer to them with startling unanimity as 'fairies' or 'elves' or 'woodland folk', according to the fantasy and self-consciousness of the different writers. The Europeans in British India who have had more prolonged contact with them stress as their chief qualities their mildness and truthfulness.

If one accepts Dr. Margaret Murray's account of the Fairies[1] as the original inhabitants of England who after the invasions of various conquering races lived in very hidden places and who were extremely timid in their contacts with the conquerors, the comparison of the Lepchas with the Fairies is extremely apt. The Lepchas who still retain a more or less integrated culture do live in relatively hidden and inaccessible places; they are remarkable climbers and walkers, they know the forest and its produce far better than any of their neighbours, and it is quite possible that they may appear in places where there is no visible path. They are pathologically shy of strangers; a foreigner passing through their villages, were he to notice the scattered and inconspicuous houses, might well think them deserted. The first few days in Lingthem we scarcely saw a soul; walking about the village we saw only shut and smokeless houses, with a very occasional dodderer or infant. The majority of the inhabitants had simply taken to the forest.

After a time this timidity wore off. I insisted that all goods bought locally should be paid for without bargaining, so that they should not fear requisitions; if too high a price was asked the goods were to be refused. I stated that I had got medicines and could cure certain sores and diseases, and after a couple of bold people

[1] *The God of the Witches*, by Dr. Margaret A. Murray. London Sampson Low n.d.

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eleven o'clock he had a bad fit of shivering as from fever, though his pulse was low. He spent the earlier part of the morning talking about his past life and especially about religious ceremonials and his own experiences as Padem. He has three rosaries and can make diagnosis. He never had a teacher to learn how to do this but learnt it through the inspiration of Padem *rum* and also from observing his mother and other Mun. He gave an illustration of the way in which he would consult his rosary in the event of another person being ill. Whether consultation shall be made or not depends partly on personal inclination and partly on wealth. Kurma said he had not consulted for his sick son or for himself because of the expense. About midday he almost collapsed and I had to give him medicine. He says he has been this way for seven days and cannot sleep inside but only out of doors. He has completely lost appetite and when he shivers suffers from optical disturbances; grown-ups look no bigger than children and he sees red and white spots moving about over the ground and has a pain under his heart; a couple of days ago he was really bad and thought he was going to die. No Mun or lama has been called in; who is going to do it? His mother-in-law and nephew are 'strangers' and do not care about him.

He has recently spent seven days with his parents-in-law working for them; it was his first visit for three months. His small son was ill with a discharge of blood from his ears and sores all down one side. At present he is slightly recovered. No professional advice was called in. Kurma says one woman said of the child: 'His father is a foreigner from Lingthem, why bother about it?'

May 19th.

Kurma came up to-day for the first time since the 13th; he walked with a stick and still looked very seedy, sweating profusely. He said, however, he was better and brought a present of eggs and tomatoes for the medicine I had given him; I gave him a lot of quinine and a little aspirin; he took all the latter but only three tablets of the quinine because it was so bitter. He was in a highly nervous state and when there was a sharp noise (either a gun[20] or a bamboo snapping) he jumped several inches and exclaimed in a frightened voice: '*athu lukni lu-li-ko*'—words which I cannot translate and which Kurma said were meaningless; to turn the

[20] There are a couple of very old match-locks in the village which are occasionally used.

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travel in the interior of the country. As an ethnologist I bitterly regretted this decision: but as a friend of the country I fully sympathised with His Highness's orders. If the policy of excluding strangers from Nepal is ever changed (which seems unlikely), I hope that I may be one of the first to benefit from it: but for the present no one who has seen the disastrous results of the contact of Western civilisation with some of the more primitive peoples of India can doubt the wisdom of Nepal's rulers.

In the meantime I was forced to consider other alternatives. It had always been my intention eventually to spend some time among the people of the Tibetan border. There are many Nepalese settlers in Sikkim, and I hoped, after seeing the people in their own country, to find out how they adjusted their lives when they came in contact with another culture. Also, there were the Lepchas, a shy and retiring people, said to be rapidly dying out, who claim to be the original inhabitants of the country. While I was still in Nepal I discussed plans with the British Minister, Colonel Bailey (some of whose earlier wanderings resulted in the first discovery of the blue poppy, *Meconopsis Baileyii*, which now thrives even in Hyde Park). He had been for many years Political Officer in Sikkim and knew the country intimately. It was from him that I first heard of the Talung Valley. Although he had not himself visited it he told me that it was the one purely Lepcha place still in existence. In all other parts of Sikkim the people had intermarried with Tibetans and Nepalis to such an extent that they had lost all traces of tribal consciousness. Not so, however, in the Talung; for this valley formed part of the Maharaja's personal estate and none but Lepchas were permitted to own land or to settle in it.

On our return from Everest I talked the matter over with the Maharaja. His Highness said he had no objection to my spending some months in the valley; but warned me that it might be difficult to get on speaking terms with the people, who had the reputation of being extremely shy and of

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resenting the intrusion of strangers. He told me that a few years ago, during an epidemic of small-pox, he had sent a vaccinator across to the valley in order to afford the people protection from the disease. But as soon as the man crossed the bridge the people fled from their houses and took to the forest, only returning when he became tired of waiting and went back to Gangtok. So far as I was concerned this story only added zest to the chase; and before leaving for England I arranged to return to Sikkim in the following spring.

On a previous occasion when I was in England, in 1934 I think it was, I had met Geoffrey Gorer at the house of a mutual friend, and we had carried on an intermittent correspondence ever since. In the meantime he had spent some months in America, and while there had met Dr. Ruth Benedict, whose remarkable *Patterns of Culture* has influenced many of the younger and more open-minded ethnologists. As a result of working both with her and with Dr. Margaret Mead, the best-known exponent of her ideas, Geoffrey decided that he wanted to see for himself just exactly what field ethnology was all about, so I said he could come and help me, little thinking that he would accept. We were, now that I come to think of it, a most oddly assorted couple: Geoffrey, a self-acknowledged gourmet, and never really happy when too long away from the centre of things; and I, who can hardly tell the difference between caviare and tinned salmon, and to whom civilisation (so called) is a thing to be escaped from at all costs for as long and as often as possible. Also, according to Geoffrey, I have strong masochistic tendencies; and since I am passionately devoted to mountains and mountaineering a well-developed "death wish"; but in his view nearly all violent exercise is merely a method of punishing oneself. Before taking to ethnology I had been for nearly twenty years in the regular army; but as for this it was, in Geoffrey's words, "only occasionally apparent." Actually, all this boils down to the fact that he belongs to that post-war generation to whom (quite rightly) freedom of every sort is all, whereas I grew up in an earlier

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eighty people, including men, women and children, would be present. They would spend the day feasting and drinking, and on some occasions would continue the party well into the following day. There would generally be some visitors from nearby villages and, in consequence, much exchange of gossip. These fortnightly meetings served the purpose of a newspaper and helped to keep the people in touch. They were almost the only break in a life of otherwise unceasing toil.

There are no shops in Lingtem, no doctor, and no school. The people are mainly self-supporting and grow all their own food. Such things as cotton, oil and salt are obtained from Mangen which, in addition to a few Marwari shopkeepers, has also a post office to which mails are delivered twice a week. This, however, is not much used, since the Lepchas are for the most part still illiterate. This means that in order not to forget a thing they do not find it necessary to commit it to writing. As a result, they have, like most primitive peoples, quite remarkable memories.

For the first few days we were left completely alone; not a soul ventured near us. Early each morning Dhawa and I would set off in our quest for people, but everywhere we went there was nothing but empty houses, each with its guardian dog. I began to get worried, for it certainly looked as though the Maharaja was right, although actually (but I only learned this later) the people were merely away working in their fields. And then one morning Geoffrey discovered an ancient alone in a house. He was toothless, decrepit, and ill, but willing to risk a visit. We decoyed him up to the monastery, gave him some medicine and plied him with cigarettes. As an informant he was useless; but his visit served to break the ice. Others followed, and the village soon realised that we really were harmless. Thereafter we were able to arrange for a regular stream of informants and someone or other usually came each morning to talk. In this manner we soon came to know most of the village by sight, and after the first few weeks were able to

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CHAPTER 2

Himalayan Hotch-potch: an Anthology of Sikkim

The country.

"SIKKIM—Native State in the Eastern Himalayas, with an area of 2,818 square miles. It is bounded on the north and east by Tibet; on the south-east by Bhutan; and on the south by Darjeeling District; and on the west by Nepal. The Tibetan name for Sikkim is pronounced Denjong, and more rarely Demjong or Demoshong; and the people are called *Rong-pa*, or 'dwellers in the valleys,' the term *Mom-pa*, or 'dwellers in the low country,' being used occasionally to describe the Lepchà inhabitants."

Gazetteer of India, Vol. 22. 1908.

The climate.

"The climate varies between the tropical heat of the valleys and the Alpine cold of the snowy ranges. The rainfall is very heavy, averaging 137 inches annually at Gangtok. From November to February the rainfall is light, and the weather in November and December is clear and fine. In March thunderstorms commence and, growing more and more frequent, usher in the rainy season, which lasts till October."

Ibid.

Encouragement for the timid traveller.

"Even in the most remote regions of Sikkim one's personal safety is assured, for the inhabitants are a peaceful and hospitable folk, and on this point even the most nervous need have no fear. Ladies travelling by themselves may undertake expeditions to the furthermost bungalows, without being subjected to the least inconvenience, their *sirdar* or headman always regarding their protection as his own personal charge.